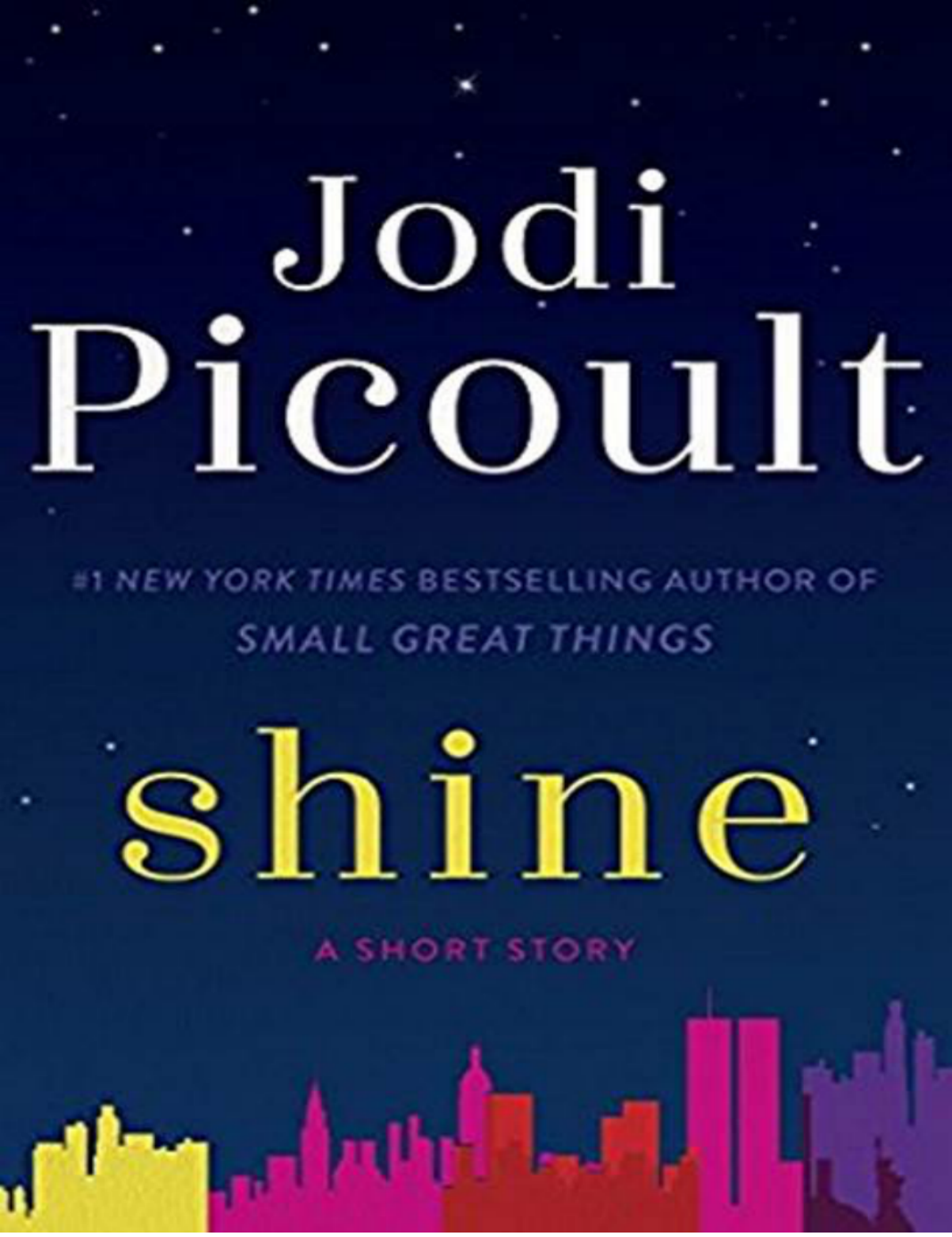
Jodi
Picoult
#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
SMALL GREAT THINGS
shine
A SHORT STORY

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

Want to receive a free physical copy of Shine? Simply pre-order Jodi Picoult's new novel Small Great Things in hardback and go to www.jodipicoult.co.uk to enter your details.

Jodi Picoult introduces characters from her new novel SMALL GREAT THINGS in this original short story.

Dalton is the school of the rich and famous, and it's eight-year-old Ruth Brooks's first day. Growing up in Harlem she never dreamed she'd be given this opportunity, and she's determined not to waste it.

But right from her first lesson Ruth is treated differently. The harder she tries, the clearer it becomes that to some people it's not the similarities that matter, but the differences – and there are plenty of those between Ruth and her new classmates.

As the days pass, she has a difficult lesson to learn: being in this new world is not the same as becoming a part of it – and becoming a part of it is starting to feel impossible.

Ruth's eye-opening story continues in Jodi Picoult's astounding new novel Small Great Things.

- Jodi Picoult
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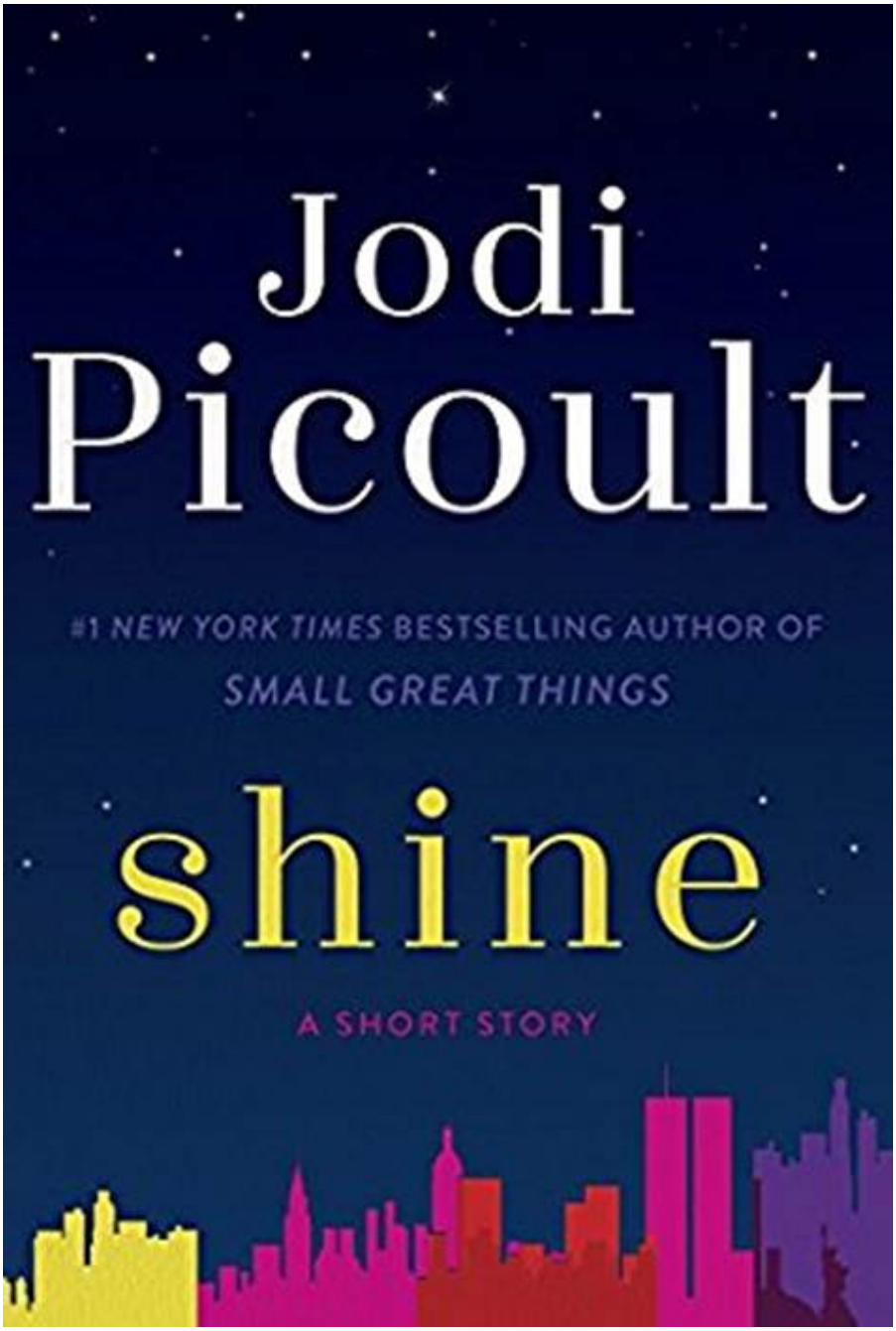
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Shine

A book in the Ruth Jefferson series, 2016

SEPTEMBER 1979

On the morning of Ruth Brooks's first day of class at the prestigious Dalton School, she sat in the kitchen of another family's house, waiting for her mama to finish packing her lunch. "You act like a guest," her mama instructed, spreading the same peanut butter on the same kind of bread that would be tucked into Christina's lunch, too. "You don't give them any reason to not invite you back."

In the past, Ruth had come only occasionally to the Hallowells' home, but all that was going to change. Now, every morning, Sam Hallowell's chauffeur would take her and Christina in a shiny black car through Central Park to the Upper East Side-Ninety-first Street-where she would be enrolled in third grade. At the end of the school day, she would return and play with Christina in her room or do homework in the kitchen until her mama finished working. Then they'd take the bus to Harlem, back to their own place, where Granny and Rachel would be waiting.

Ruth knew that it was a blessing to go to this fancy school. In first grade, she and her sister, Rachel, had both gone to a school that was mostly Orthodox Jewish kids. Ruth had loved it-everything from the snap-together cubes for counting to the felt board with a floppy sun, a listless cloud, a thunderbolt, a snowflake. But it was a two-hour commute each way on the bus. In second grade, Ruth had gone to public school in Harlem. It was as different from her first school as possible. There were no books in the school library that didn't have most of their pages ripped out. The teachers spent more time yelling than teaching. Rachel had never been an engaged student, but Ruth was having the life sucked out of her. She didn't know what conversation between Ms. Mina and Mama had led to this full scholarship, but she had taken a test and done well, and that was that-she was in. And she was grateful.

At least, she was supposed to be.

She swung her feet on the kitchen stool, thinking of Rachel, who didn't have to get up at 5:30 A.M. to go to school. Rachel was in fifth grade this year, and thought she knew everything. Like last night, she told Ruth that she would probably be the only Black girl in the whole

school and nobody would talk to her. Ruth had asked her mama on the bus ride in whether that was true. “Ms. Christina will talk to you,” her mama had said. “You two have known each other forever.”

But there was a difference between visiting the brownstone on a random Saturday and playing with Barbies, and actually attending the same school as Christina. Plus, Christina had gone to this school since kindergarten and already had friends. Just thinking about it made Ruth’s throat feel too tight.

Christina bounced into the kitchen. Her hair was caught back in her favorite barrette, the one with silk roses glued to it. She carried a spotless pink backpack.

“It’s time to go,” she said, her voice a musical scale. “You ready, Ruth?”

Ruth hopped off the chair. Her mama straightened her cardigan and handed her one of the bag lunches. “Baby girl,” Mama said to Christina, “don’t you forget this.”

Christina took the matching lunch. As Ruth followed her into the parlor, Ms. Mina was waiting with little Louis in her arms. He was only three, not even in preschool yet, and he was not having a lot of success at potty training. “Are you excited, Ruth?” Ms. Mina asked. “First day!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ruth said. *Excited* and *terrified* felt as if they might be one and the same.

The sedan was already in front of the brownstone. The minute they walked outside, a man burst out of the car like a kernel of popcorn exploding. He opened the back door and gave a little bow. “Ms. Christina,” he said. “Ms. Ruth.”

If Rachel could see this, she’d bust up. *Can’t they open their own car doors?*

Ruth just said thank you and buckled herself in. She and Christina waved to their mothers on the stoop until they couldn’t see them anymore. “Wait till you meet Lola,” Christina said. “Lola has a pet monkey. I swear. It’s part of her dad’s work or something.” She leaned toward Ruth. “It wears a *diaper*.”

Ruth imagined going to a new friend’s house and meeting this monkey in a diaper. She pictured teaching it a trick, like how to clap or something, and her new friend telling everyone else what Ruth had done.

And suddenly, they were there. The driver opened the door and Christina bolted from the car, shrieking and throwing her arms around a girl who had silvery blond hair. Lola, maybe? She didn’t look back. They were talking so fast that it sounded like a different language.

The driver handed Ruth her backpack, which had been Rachel’s last year. “You have a nice day, Ms. Ruth,” he said gently.

It was at that moment that Ruth realized her mother had never answered her *other* question on the bus: would there be anyone else at Dalton who looked like her?

Ruth stepped onto the curb. Then she took a deep breath and dove into a wave of white.

–

At Dalton you didn't get assigned to a teacher's classroom, you got assigned to a house-which, Ruth figured out quickly, was just a fancy word for a bunch of kids who were all the same age.

Christina was in her house, and so was the girl with the silvery hair-Lola. Ruth trailed them inside to Ms. Thomas's room, waiting for a break in the conversation so that she could introduce herself, like Mama told her to do. She waited for Christina to come to her rescue, to say, *This is Ruth.* But instead Christina ducked into the room and ran to the neat row of cubbies. "Lola," she called. "We're next to each other!"

Last year, Ruth had not had a cubby. She put her lunch neatly in the bottom and hung her jacket up on a hook. When she turned around, there was a pretty redheaded lady crouched down, holding out her hand. "I'm Ms. Thomas," she said. "I'm the house adviser." Ruth guessed that was the Dalton word for *teacher*. "What's your name?"

"Ruth," she said.

"Well, Ruth, we are so glad to have you with us this year."

Ruth nodded. But she wondered who else Ms. Thomas was speaking for; who was the *we* in that equation.

They played a game where everyone clapped a rhythm that went with their name, and everyone else in the class had to mimic it. Ruth tapped her right knee, left knee, then waved her hands like she was singing hallelujah at church. *Ruth,* everyone said, and they did the same motion she had done. It made her think of her granny's story about going to the French part of Canada once, and how she had to do charades just to ask where the toilet was.

Ms. Thomas wore a double strand of pearls that had a glittery spider clasp in the back, and Ruth counted the number of times that the spider slipped down her neck and Ms. Thomas had to tug it back into place. Ms. Thomas showed everyone a picture of herself in a white princess dress, with a handsome man beside her in a tuxedo. It looked like snow was falling on them, but it was rice. She told everyone that her husband's name was David and then she showed another picture, this one of a very small dog called Caesar. "That's my family," she said. "Now I want you to draw me a picture of yours!"

Ruth was placed at a table with a boy named Marcus (clap up high, clap down low) and a girl named Maia (tiny claps all around her

face, like the petals of a sunflower). Ruth had seen Marcus pick his nose during the circle time, and between that and the fact that he was a boy, she had very little interest in him. Maia, though, was the only other student in the house who was new to Dalton. She had moved from Dallas. She had red hair like a molten river that was held back by a rhinestone headband. She had an accent, and when she spoke, her voice was full of music.

At each seat was the kind of thick vanilla drawing paper Ruth remembered from her year at the Jewish school. A confetti of crayons splashed the center of every table. "We have to share," Maia announced. She took the crayons and rolled a few toward each of them, divvying up the colors.

Christina was all the way across the room. Ruth wondered what she was drawing to illustrate her family, whether Mama would be part of it. After all, Mama spent more hours taking care of Christina than her own mother did; it was her job. And Ms. Mina was always calling Mama *family*. But could Mama be on Christina's drawing *and* Ruth's? Didn't Ruth get first dibs?

Or what if Christina left Mama out of her drawing? Did that suggest family meant different things to different people?

Honestly, Ruth couldn't figure out what would make her more upset: seeing Christina's finished drawing with Mama in it, or not.

"You get these," Maia announced, pushing a bunch of crayons toward Marcus and another group toward Ruth.

"No way," he said. "I need flesh color." He grabbed the peach crayon that was in front of Maia.

Ruth looked at the crayons in front of her. She picked up the dark blue, because Maia had saved the black for herself. She made the outline of Mama, and then drew in Rachel and herself and Granny. Then she picked up the brown crayon.

Marcus was coloring in his family with the peach crayon. Maia was making a big deal of having to wait for it.

Ruth colored her mother's face. She forgot to leave white for the eyes, and couldn't go backward, which left Mama looking angry. So she was more careful as she drew her own face. She touched the brown crayon gently to the page, shading so faintly she could barely see the pigment.

–

Recess happened on the roof of the school building, an artificial garden in the middle of the city. Maia had drawn the girls in the house to her like filings to a magnet. She told them that in Texas she had lived on a ranch and ridden horses every day, something New York City girls did only during summer camp and something Ruth had never done. Horses frightened her. She didn't like the yellow of their

huge teeth.

She took a deep breath and sat down just behind Christina, as if she were about to start a second concentric circle, even if she was the only member. Christina glanced over her shoulder and then scooted to the right, creating a few inches of space that couldn't fit Ruth's leg, much less her whole body. Maia was designing some sort of game: "And this is the castle, and the boys over there are the trolls that can't ever touch you, and if you cross the line by the bench you're out of the whole kingdom, and-"

Ruth wedged her feet into the spot Christina had created and scooted as far forward as she could. "Can I play too?"

Maia stared at her and scrunched her nose. "But we're playing *Princess,*" she said. "You can't be a princess. You don't have the right hair."

Instinctively, Ruth touched her hair. It curved in a bob to just above her chin. Lola touched it. "I like your hair," she said. "It's pretty."

"My granny used the hot comb," Ruth said, and all six girls in the circle looked at her blankly.

Ruth puffed up a little, excited to know something they didn't. "Yeah," she continued. "You heat it up on the stove, and while it's getting ready Granny puts green Super Gro grease on my hair, and then when the comb's really hot, she runs it through to get it all straight."

Lola stared at Ruth. "And it just stays like that?"

"Yeah. Till she washes it again in a couple of weeks."

Maia's eyes widened. "You don't wash your hair every day?" she said. "Do you even *shower*?"

The others girls laughed. Ruth couldn't see Christina's face, couldn't hear whether she was laughing, too. She felt tears cutting the tunnel of her throat, and stood up fast, her fists at her sides. "I don't want to play your game," Ruth said, and she looked down at Christina. "You want to go over there and play something else?"

Christina hesitated. She looked up at Ruth, but her eyes weren't full of *I'm sorry*. They were angry, as if she blamed Ruth for making her the rope in this tug-of-war. Christina ducked her head without answering.

Ruth ran to the far corner of the rooftop garden. She lay down on the ground, staring up at the clouds so that it was easy to think that they weren't even in the city anymore, if you blocked out the sound of the car horns from below. She blinked fast, and kept her eyes extra wide, and all the other tricks she knew to keep from crying.

She could hear Maia assigning character names. Princess Marigold. Princess Daffodil. Princess Ivy.

Ms. Thomas walked toward Ruth and sat down beside her, following Ruth's gaze up to the sky. "You know," she said, as if they had been in the middle of a conversation, "there are stars there right now. You can't see them, because they're obscured by the sun. But the minute the sun goes away, wow-they're as bright as jewels."

Ruth didn't know why Ms. Thomas was telling her this. She didn't know why Ms. Thomas had come over here in the first place. She just wanted to go home. She wanted to be in Harlem in school with Rachel. Except she didn't really want to be there, either. So where did that leave her?

"Can I tell you a secret?" Ms. Thomas whispered. "We're going to study stars this year. But I'm trusting you not to tell anyone else, all right? It's going to be a surprise."

Ruth sat up, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Deal?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ruth said.

Ms. Thomas put her arm around Ruth's shoulders and squeezed. "Would you be the leader for me today, when we line up to go downstairs?"

Ruth nodded.

Ms. Thomas stood up and clapped. "Okay, boys and girls! Line up behind Ruth!"

Ruth stood at the door that led into the building and down the stairs. She thought about the secret Ms. Thomas had told her. She liked holding on to it. Sometimes at Ms. Mina's she took a hard candy from the bowl in the foyer and kept it in her pocket and didn't eat it, because she liked to stick her hand inside hours or even days later and know she had a surprise nobody else had.

"Everyone line up behind Ruth," Ms. Thomas repeated, and Ruth stood a little taller.

–

On the bus that night, headed back home, Mama wanted to know everything: What were the names of the friends she made? What did she learn in school? What was her teacher like?

Ruth told her about the clapping game and Marcus picking his nose and how she got to be the recess leader.

"And what about the other girls?" Mama asked.

"There's Maia," Ruth replied. "She's from Texas and she used to ride horses every day. We played Princess during recess."

Mama smiled so wide Ruth could see the pink of her gums. "Isn't that fine," she said.

It was the first time, Ruth realized, that she had ever lied to her mama.

But then, was it so bad to lie if you told someone what you knew

they needed to hear?

–

The amount of freedom at Ruth's new school was staggering. As long as you weren't making trouble, you could just get up and go to the bathroom, without raising your hand first. There were breaks and free periods and recess and times when students were working on individual projects. Even in third grade, the Dalton administration believed, children could and should choose their own paths.

Ruth's path was unobtrusive. She stuck close to Christina, if Christina let her-which was usually when no one else was around. Maybe out of guilt and maybe out of kindness, when Maia and the others *did* show up, Christina made sure that Ruth was still included, even if it meant just tagging along with the rest of them and laughing when the others laughed, although she hadn't heard the joke. Maia was the sun and they were all in orbit; Ruth happened to be on the outskirts of the universe.

Maia's birthday was the second Friday of school, and her mother brought in cupcakes. Each one had a maple leaf poking out of the icing. The leaf was translucent, made of sugar, and was painted with some kind of edible paint so that it looked real. Ruth had never seen anything like it, and she wanted to show her mother and Rachel, so she carefully wrapped hers in a paper towel and tucked it into the pocket of her sweatshirt.

Because it was Maia's birthday, she was the leader of the recess line that day. Everyone fell into place behind her, snaking down the hallway. From her vantage point farther back in the line, Ruth could see that Maia was wearing her sparkling rhinestone headband. But now, Ruth realized, there were three other girls in the class who had matching ones. They looked like halos.

Ruth turned away and focused her attention instead on the bulletin board that was on the wall. Ms. Thomas had hung up the family portraits they'd drawn on the first day of school, which felt like a thousand years ago. It was easy for Ruth to find hers, because it was the only picture with brown faces.

Well, actually that wasn't true. Ruth let her eyes hopscotch over the other drawings until she found Christina's. There was Christina, front and center, with Ms. Mina and Mr. Sam. There was her little brother, Louis. And in the far right corner, much smaller than the other bodies, was a brown woman wearing an apron and holding a plate of cookies. Ruth knew it was supposed to be Mama. Her mama floated there like an untethered astronaut.

Ruth imagined her swimming off the edge of Christina's page, across the bulletin board, and settling into Ruth's drawing, where she belonged.

Ruth felt a shove in her back and realized that while she had been busy daydreaming the line had started moving. Ruth muttered an apology to Lola, who stood behind her, and hurried to catch up to the others.

–

To be honest, Ruth had never really thought about the fact that her mama had to cook dinner for Christina's family and then come to Harlem and cook all over again for her own. Maybe it was Christina's drawing that got her thinking about this, but that night at home, she found herself watching Mama cook chicken in the pan. As usual, Granny was dozing in front of the TV; she helped out where she could but that was less and less as she got older. "Mama?" she asked. "Don't you get sick of doing everything twice?"

"What do you mean, baby?"

"You have to take care of Christina's house and our house too," Ruth said.

Her mama smiled. "Well, now," she replied. "One I do for work. The other I do for love."

Just then Rachel walked into the kitchen and snorted. "It's still double the dishes," she said.

Mama gave her a sharp glance. "Then maybe you should start doing your share of chores?"

It was at that moment Ruth remembered the maple leaf candy. "I have something to show you," she announced. "They were on top of Maia's birthday cupcakes."

She dug her hand into her sweatshirt pocket and unwrapped the paper toweling. The leaf, however, had broken into pieces, some so fine they'd turned themselves back into granulated sugar.

"What's that?" Rachel asked.

"A leaf made of candy," Ruth answered.

"Okay." Rachel laughed. "If you say so."

–

After dinner, Mama told Rachel to take Ruth with her to play outside so she could sit down with Granny in the living room and put her feet up for a hot second. Ruth sat on the curb while Rachel and two of her friends giggled over the older boys shooting hoops in the lot across the street. "You see Joziah?" Denyce said. "He all that."

Nia popped a bubble with her gum. "I heard he's strapped."

"What?" Rachel said. "That's wack."

Sometimes it seemed to Ruth that Rachel and her friends spoke a different language.

"He ain't got no gun," Denyce said. "He just like to tell people he do."

A gun? Ruth didn't realize she'd spoken out loud until the girls all

stared at her. “Oh, look,” Nia said. “We shocked your baby sister.”

If Mama knew Rachel was anywhere close to the boys in this neighborhood who got into trouble, she would whup her and keep her locked inside.

“Leave me alone, Nia,” Ruth said. “I’m not bothering you.”

Nia smirked. “So what you sayin’?”

“Hey, Ruth,” Denyce asked. “How’s your fancy school?” She got up from the stoop and sat down next to Ruth. Nia followed suit, sandwiching her on the other side.

“Look at that,” Nia said, grabbing Ruth’s wrist. “I think your skin’s getting lighter.”

“You practically a ghost,” Denyce said, and both girls broke up laughing.

“Aight, you fools,” Rachel interrupted. “Leave her be. It ain’t her fault she smarter than both your brains put together.”

“I’m going inside,” Ruth announced, but she was pretty sure no one cared.

Her mama and Granny were on the couch, watching *Wheel of Fortune*. “What’s the matter, baby?” Mama asked.

“Nothing,” Ruth said. “I just wanted to take a bath.”

She went into the bathroom the four of them shared. The tub had a crack in it that was the shape of a lightning bolt, and Ruth used to think that the water would run right through Mrs. Nattuck’s ceiling, but since she’d never complained and they bathed every night, that probably wasn’t the case. She ran the water and put on a shower cap to cover her hair and sank down to her shoulders. Then she lathered up soap on her washcloth. Her palms were pink, as pink as Christina’s. She flipped her hand over, to the light brown of her wrist and forearm. Her skin had always been lighter than Rachel’s; her sister had been dark as a berry her whole life. Was that why Ruth was the one who was going to Dalton?

Ruth picked up the washcloth and scrubbed at her left shoulder. She scrubbed so hard she could see the pink bloom of irritation under the brown of her skin.

It hurt.

It was beautiful.

–

On Monday, Ruth woke up before her alarm. She had brushed her teeth and dressed and packed up her schoolwork before her mama even came out of her bedroom. “Isn’t someone in a hurry!” Mama said, but she smiled.

Ruth couldn’t wait to get back to Dalton. Today they would be playing a math game and the winning team would get Halloween candy. She had practiced her times tables all weekend. She would

win, and then she would share the candy with Maia and the other girls, and this time they would not just tolerate her, they'd welcome her.

When they reached Ms. Mina's brownstone and went in the service entrance, Ruth raced up the stairs. She sat on a kitchen stool, kicking her legs, and printed out multiplication equations on a napkin. Ms. Mina came into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. "It's just finished brewing," Mama said. "I would have brought it up to you."

"Oh, I know that, Lou," she answered. "I was up all night with the baby and my body simply couldn't wait another second." She glanced at Ruth, who was now solving her equations. "Well, look at *you*!" Ms. Mina said. "And I can barely get Christina out of bed!"

But this wasn't true because at that moment Christina came into the kitchen, wearing a rhinestone headband, to pick up her school lunch from Mama.

–

There were two teams. Ms. Thomas randomly divided the students in half, and set up a buzzer on a desk in the middle of the classroom. One member of each team would face off as she recited a multiplication equation. The first person to hit the buzzer and say the correct answer would get to shoot a ball made of masking tape into one of three baskets. The farthest one was worth the most points. At the end of the game, the team with the most points would win.

Ruth faced off against Marcus first, and was given a cream puff of a question: 3 x 4. She rang the buzzer and tossed the tape ball into the trash can that was closest, because she didn't want to risk missing completely and they were better safe than sorry. They rotated through two more times, and each time, Ruth won her heat (6 x 6, and the very tricky 8 x 9). Maia was on the other team, along with Christina. Ruth knew it wasn't charitable, but when Maia screwed up and said 4 x 7 was 24, her stomach flipped with satisfaction.

Finally it was tied, and Ms. Thomas said they had to choose a designated shooter from each team to make a winning basket. It would be sudden death-the person who was picked would throw the tape ball and then the opposing team's pick would do the same, until one of them missed. Ruth leaned back against the wall, waiting for her team to rally around Edward or Lucas, who were the most athletic in the class. But instead, someone suggested her name.

At first, she flushed with pride-was she being chosen because her team recognized her as an MVP? But then she realized that wasn't what was going on here. "Yeah, Ruth," Edward said, nodding. "You know how to play basketball, don't you?"

Ruth nodded. She did know *how*-she'd watched neighborhood kids for years. But she'd never actually played the game herself.

"Of *course* she does," said Lucas. "Duh."

Reluctantly, Ruth took the tape ball and sank a basket into the farthest trash bin. Her team shouted and Lucas even gave her a high five.

The designated shooter for the other team was a tall boy named Jack who stuck out his tongue when he was concentrating, which wasn't often. He narrowed his eyes and let the tape ball roll off his fingertips. He, too, made the farthest basket.

Ruth took the ball again. She was not an athlete. She could barely walk and sing simultaneously during the Christmas pageant at church. There was absolutely no way she could be lucky enough to succeed a second time around. Then she remembered how Mama said there was no such thing as luck, just prayers being answered. So even though Ruth was certain God had more important things on His mind, she called on Jesus under her breath, and made a second basket. A third. Her teammates went wild. *Water into wine? Ha,* Ruth thought. This newfound athletic skill was a true miracle.

Jack took the ball, bounced on the tips of his toes, and stuck out his tongue. He arched one arm up, but the tape got snagged on the cuff of his sweater and fell about six feet short of the closest trash can.

"We have a winner!" Ms. Thomas sang, above a chorus of *Do over!* and *Not fair!* Ruth's team was hollering, patting her on the back and the shoulder, shouting her name. The teacher took out a bag of candy-Reese's peanut butter cups and Nestlé Crunch bars and Gobstoppers-and everyone on Ruth's team was allowed to stick their hand in and take a fistful.

Ruth made sure she got extra Reese's, then walked to Christina's desk. Maia was sitting on the top of it, whispering to Christina. "Want some?" Ruth asked, and she held out her cupped hands, letting them choose first.

"Everyone knows why you won," Maia said.

Ruth lifted her chin a notch. "Because I knew my times tables."

"More like because of how you look." Maia tossed her hair. "I don't want your dumb candy," she said, and she walked away.

Ruth stared at her. Christina fished through the candy Ruth held, choosing a Reese's. She unwrapped it and took a bite of the candy, leaving little ridges in the wake of her teeth. "I knew my times tables," Ruth murmured.

"It's not you, Ruth," Christina said. She popped the rest of the candy into her mouth. "She just doesn't like Black people."

–

Ruth watched her granny's hands twist Rachel's hair, pulling and crisscrossing to magically create the neat cornrows that weaved across her scalp in parallel zigzags. Rachel winced and whined, like always,

but the end result was the same: tight, even braids that fell down to her shoulders. “Done,” Granny pronounced, holding up the big hand mirror so that Rachel could see the back. “Ruth?”

Every other Sunday night, Granny washed and styled her granddaughters’ hair. Granny had run her own place for years before it got to be too much for her to stand on her feet all day. Ruth climbed onto the stool, her hair still damp under the towel.

Granny’s hands rooted through Ruth’s hair, her fingernails scraping the scalp in a massage. She took her comb and made the first part.

“Wait-can you put the hood thing on and use the hot comb instead?” Ruth blurted out. “Please?”

Granny laughed, her hands on her wide hips. Ruth had always thought her granny looked like the sail of a ship-heavy-masted, wide, implacable. “Lou, you hear this? Queen of Sheba here wants a press.”

Mama, who was sewing a button onto one of Ruth’s white school shirts, looked up from where she sitting at the kitchen table. “You should be grateful your granny’s doing *anything* to your hair,” she said. “We’re not running a salon.”

Granny was pulling tighter on her hair. “Ain’t never had no complaints before from my own grandbaby…”

“It’s not you,” Ruth said, hearing Christina’s words beneath her own. “It’s that I want to look more…grown up.”

What she wanted was to look like Maia, with her river of shining hair. But that was about as likely as Ruth waking up in a millionaire’s penthouse. Granny and Mama exchanged a look, and then Mama shrugged.

“Fine,” Granny sighed. “Go get the comb.”

Ruth scrambled to the cabinet where they kept the bonnet dryer and hot comb. Granny set the drying cap over her head and then placed the comb on the metal coil of the stove. After the bonnet cut off, she ran the Super Gro through a section of hair. Ruth tried not to think about how she had explained this to the other girls; how they had looked at her like she was an alien.

She held still as Granny ran the comb through her hair; she’d been burned enough to know the consequences of fidgeting. By the time she was finished, Mama had mended two more shirts, let out one of Rachel’s skirts (“That girl grows like a weed,” she muttered), and darned a sock. Rachel walked into the kitchen to get an apple out of the refrigerator and looked at Ruth. “You goin’ somewhere special?” she asked.

“Just school.”

“It looks good,” Rachel said, as Ruth narrowed her eyes, suspicious. “Like that skater lady. Dorothy Hamill.”

"For real?" Ruth asked.

Rachel took a bite. "Nope," she said.

"Rachel!" Mama warned, but her sister was already cruising out of the kitchen on a laugh.

"Don't you listen to her, baby," Granny said. "You beautiful, inside and out."

She held up the mirror so that Ruth could see both the front and the back. Her hair was straight and shiny, curving just slightly at the bottom. "You know what would make this even more perfect?" Ruth said. "A headband."

"So go get a headband," Granny said. "You got that nice red one you wore at Easter."

"Some of the girls in my class have the kind that sparkle," Ruth said, as casually as she could manage. "I wish I had one."

Mama didn't even look up from the sock she was mending. "We're not made of money, Ruth," she said, and she bit off the thread with her teeth.

–

On Columbus Day, Dalton was closed, but Mama still had to work. Rachel was invited to Nia's apartment and Ruth tagged along to the Upper West Side to play with Christina. Since Mr. Sam was out, Christina had Mama set up his movie projector, so that she and Ruth could watch the *Wonderful World of Disney* films that lined his shelves in their round metal tins. He worked in television, and their house was full of treasures Ruth could appreciate, like that, and others she couldn't-like the framed, signed photographs of movie stars she didn't know: Doris Day, Jack Lemmon, Steve McQueen.

Ruth and Christina ate grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup that Mama had made, and watched *Cinderella*. Christina was the only person Ruth knew who could watch a movie in her house and not have to go to a movie theater. They sat on Mr. Sam's red leather couch and shared an afghan that Ms. Mina had knitted when she was going through a crafty phase.

When the prince kissed Cinderella at the end, Christina said, "You know, it doesn't just work like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you can marry a prince if you're some nobody. You have to have a title."

Ruth thought about this. "Like a book?"

"I don't know," Christina admitted. "But not everyone has one. Maia said."

Maia said. Of course. "Does *she* have a title?" Ruth asked.

Christina considered this. "Bossypants?"

A surprised laugh bubbled out of Ruth. Then Christina was

laughing, too, and it was the two of them and no one else, like it used to be.

Christina turned to her when the projector started flapping, the film having run its course. “Now what should we do?” she said. “Want to see my new Malibu Barbie?”

We. Was there a better word in the English language?

“Christina?” Ruth said hesitantly. “This is fun, right?”

Christina looked at her sidelong. “Yeah, weirdo,” she said, grinning.

“So when we’re at school, then…are you mad at me?”

There was a pause. “No,” Christina said, but in that hiccup of time, Ruth heard a thousand yeses. “Why would you even think that?”

“Because you act different when it’s not just us.”

“No I don’t!”

“You do,” Ruth said, but now she was second-guessing herself. Was she imagining it? Christina had been nothing short of nice all day. Maybe the problem wasn’t Christina, but Ruth herself. It wasn’t like it was Christina’s job to defend Ruth from Maia; Ruth had to do that on her own. So why was she blaming Christina?

Suddenly she realized Christina was crying. “Why are you being so *mean* to me?” she said, just as Mama walked in to take away their empty plates.

“Christina?” Mama said, alarmed. She crouched down and gave Christina a tissue from her own pocket to dry her face. “What happened?”

“I don’t want to play anymore,” Christina sobbed, red-faced, not even looking at Ruth.

“Okay, then, you go on up to your room, and I’ll bring you some dessert. I baked fresh blondies. That sound good to you?”

Christina sniffled and nodded, and a minute later, she was gone. Mama folded her arms. “What did you say to upset Ms. Christina?”

The truth? Ruth thought. But instead she lowered her eyes. “Christina’s only my friend when we’re here,” she confessed. “The minute we walk through the door of school, everything changes.”

She expected Mama to get mad at her for lying. After all, it had been nearly six weeks and Ruth had gone on and on about how great school was, how many friends she had made. But instead Mama sighed and took Ruth’s hand. “Baby girl,” she said, “*nothing* changes.”

–

Two days later, Ms. Thomas got a student teacher. Miss Van Vleet was in college and would be coming to their classroom only on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. She would help the students who needed extra work with their writing, and she would be teaching some of the lessons. But that first day, her main job was to learn everyone’s

name, and she was really, really bad at it.

She called Maia *Mara,* and Lola *Lulu*. She mixed up Edward and Lucas.

Ms. Thomas tried to help her by giving her a stack of graded papers to hand out after recess. Miss Van Vleet wandered around the classroom, sometimes asking other students for help. Some of the boys tried to confuse her as a prank, and after that, when she had a question, she went straight to Ms. Thomas.

"Which one is Ruth again?" Miss Van Vleet asked.

Ms. Thomas looked up from where she was marking papers. She glanced around the room to see where Ruth was sitting, and Ruth met her gaze. Instead of pointing, she turned to Miss Van Vleet and hesitated for a moment. Then she said, "She's the girl with the red sneakers."

Ruth looked down at her red Keds. There were three other girls in her classroom who had the same shoes.

On the other hand, she was the only Black student.

–

That night, Rachel was being grounded without television privileges because she'd decked a girl for stealing her HoHos at lunch. That punishment wouldn't have bothered Ruth, who would have happily sat in her room reading, but Rachel had never willingly picked up a book, as far as Ruth could remember. So instead, while Ruth tried to memorize words for her spelling test, she had to block out the sound of Rachel galumphing around the room they shared, trying to find some other way to occupy her time.

"You want me to test you?" Rachel offered.

"Why?"

There was probably a catch. With Rachel, there was always a catch. It wasn't that she didn't love her sister; it was just that they saw the world through two different lenses.

"Because I'm being nice. And because I'm bored as all get out." She reached out her hand, and hesitantly Ruth gave her the list of words. Rachel climbed onto her bed and stuffed a pillow behind her head. "Baby words," she muttered, reading them over. *"Means."*

"M-E-A-N-S."

"Corn."

"C-O-R-N."

"Argue."

"A-R-G-U-E."

"This is stupid," Rachel said. "You don't even have to try. Why doesn't your teacher bump you up a level?"

Ruth didn't know the answer to that; there were other students who had more challenging words, although she had never gotten less

than a 95 on a spelling test.

"Well, *I* know why, even if you don't," Rachel said. "Because your teacher doesn't think a Black girl can be at the top of the class."

"That's not true," Ruth immediately said, defending Ms. Thomas. "She knows I'm smart."

"Uh-huh," Rachel answered, in a way that meant anything but that.

"She doesn't even see me as Black," Ruth countered.

Rachel laughed. "Yeah, 'cause she's too busy seeing you as a charity case."

Ruth knew that her sister meant this as a dig, but she fiercely believed that Ms. Thomas saw more than just her skin color. She saw a girl who always said please and thank you and who never interrupted someone else if they were talking. She saw a student who was one of the best readers in the class, who loved learning astronomy. She saw a good listener, a willing friend.

She saw someone who was one of them.

Smugly, Ruth told Rachel what had happened that day at school. How Ms. Thomas had identified her.

"You really think the reason she pointed you out by your sneakers was because it was the only thing she could use to describe you?" Rachel asked.

That was all it took-that chink in the foundation, that worm of a question-for Ruth to peek behind the fancy wrapping of the story she'd created in her own mind. The justification, the wishful thinking-it was swept away by the broom of doubt like so much smoke.

Ruth knew she was partly right: Ms. Thomas had been showing a kindness by not singling Ruth out for her appearance. She was trying to be inclusive by not calling Ruth "the Black girl."

But that was because to Ms. Thomas, to Maia, to Miss Van Vleet-to everyone in that school-Black wasn't just any adjective.

It was something they'd never want to be.

–

"I know you don't want to be my friend," Ruth said by way of prefacing her conversation with Christina in the sedan on the way to school. "But can I ask you something?"

For almost a week now, they had moved in similar orbits, but they had not interacted unless they were forced to in a group project. Christina didn't look at Ruth, but she jerked her chin: *Okay*.

Ruth explained what had happened with Ms. Thomas and Miss Van Vleet. "If you were in a crowd with a lot of people and someone asked me who you were, I wouldn't say you're the one with the scar on your ankle from where you fell last summer. I'd use something everyone would see right away, like…your purple shirt or your Holly

Hobbie lunch box. Doesn't it seem weird?" Ruth asked. "To not call something what it *is*?"

Christina didn't answer, and Ruth thought it was because she was still mad at her. But then she turned in her seat so that she was facing Ruth. "Maybe no one notices that you're Black," she said. "I mean, you act and sound just like *we* do."

Ruth thought about this. It couldn't really be true, could it? If she dressed in pants and played baseball and did gross things that boys did, like have burping contests, would teachers not know that she was a girl? You couldn't *unsee* what was right before your eyes, could you?

Before she could mull on this further, Christina spoke again. "I never said I didn't want to be your friend," she said, her voice small. "It's just…all of a sudden you're at *my* school, with *my* friends, and I thought…I thought…" She raised her hand to the window and spread her fingers like a starfish. "What if they liked you more than they like me?"

Ruth didn't know what to say. It was the first time she realized that a person might look like Christina, and live in a fancy home, and dress in designer clothing, and have everything her heart desired, and still go to sleep at night worrying.

Maybe we are *more alike than we're different,* Ruth thought.

–

When Ms. Thomas turned off the lights in the classroom, everyone got quiet. Then she flicked them back on again. "Now," she asked, "how long did it take for the light to come back?"

It was instantaneous, immediate. There was probably a word for faster-than-a-heartbeat but Ruth didn't know it.

"Light moves fast. It can move 186,000 miles per second," Ms. Thomas said. "The reason it seems like we see light the instant I turn on the switch is because light is so quick, and because we're so close to it. But some light comes from much farther away-light from stars. They're so far away, in fact, that we don't even measure the distance in miles. We measure it in light-years-the amount of time it takes for light from that star to reach us, on earth. The reason stars look so small in the night sky is because they're so far away from us."

Ms. Thomas talked about the star that was closest to earth-the sun. She made Marcus stand at the front of the class with a flashlight and told him to turn it on. "If he was on the sun, and turned on a very bright flashlight…and we were all waiting in the classroom, we wouldn't see that light for eight minutes. *That's* how far away the sun is from us." The next closest star was called Proxima Centauri. It was 39.9 trillion kilometers away from us, or 4.2 light-years, which meant that it would take four years-not just eight minutes-for Marcus's flashlight to reach us on earth from there.

Ms. Thomas said that when we look at a star, we're looking backward in time. We're seeing a moment that happened millions of years ago.

Ruth thought about that. She knew Marcus's little flashlight wasn't powerful enough, but even so. What if there were kids on another planet who, years from now, saw it flash? What if, in the future, they had a piece of the moment Ruth was living right now?

It made her feel like yesterday and tomorrow weren't all that far away from each other.

Then Ms. Thomas gave everyone a toilet paper roll and a circle of black paper. Each student could choose to create either the Canis Major constellation or Orion. Ruth looked over and saw Maia pick Orion. She reached for the other one.

They had to trace the spiky limbs of the constellations, and poke tiny holes in at their joints to make the stars. Ruth carefully drew the T of Canis Major, and its split legs. It looked to her like a stick figure without a head. She used a pin carefully to mark the stars. Then with Ms. Thomas's help she affixed the black circle to one end of the roll, with electrical tape to seal the edges. When everyone in the class had finished, Ms. Thomas gave each of them a small penlight and pulled the drapes shut and turned off the classroom fluorescents. Everyone lay on the floor, shining their penlights through the toilet paper rolls, projecting their constellations onto the ceiling.

Ruth felt someone lie down beside her, and she turned to find Ms. Thomas staring up at the ceiling. "You see that star in the middle on top?" she asked, pointing, and Ruth nodded. "That's called Sirius. It takes light from that star eight and a half years to reach us here."

"That's how old I am," Ruth said.

"Well, then." Ms. Thomas laughed. "If you can see it in the night sky, you're looking at light that's the same age as you."

Ruth liked the idea of a star that she had something in common with. She wondered if she could convince her mother to let her out on the fire escape tonight to try to find it.

"It's easy to find Sirius," Ms. Thomas was saying, "because it's the brightest star we can see." She rolled to a sitting position and squeezed Ruth's shoulder. "Sometimes, it even casts a shadow."

The whole rest of the day Ruth found it hard to concentrate. She kept looking out the window at the cars below, and the people walking their dogs, and the ladies pushing strollers. She pictured a world bigger than the classroom, bigger than Manhattan, bigger than the boundaries of her imagination.

–

The scariest part of the Presidential Physical Fitness Test was climbing the rope that hung from the ceiling of the tiny gymnasium.

There were two: one with knots, and one without. Ruth was worried she couldn't even shimmy her way up the one with knots. You had to excel at all the sections: the shuttle run, the one-mile run, the curl-ups, the pull-ups, the rope climb, the V-sit reach. If you did, you got a gold certificate as an award.

Ruth, who got straight As, didn't like failing at anything, even gym class.

Because of their last names, it was Maia's turn just before Ruth's. She picked the rope with the knots (girls had a choice, boys didn't) and made it halfway up before she started to panic. Her eyes squirreled shut and her face went red and she clutched the rope like it was a lifeline. Even when Mr. Yorkey, the gym teacher, told her to come on down, she couldn't unhook herself. It took two other teachers to help pry her off the rope, and when Maia reached ground level the other girls flocked around her like worker bees to the queen. Lola was chosen to help walk Maia to the nurse's office.

When it was Ruth's turn, she wiped her hands on her shorts and pulled with all her might to anchor her feet to the bottom knot. Then she closed her eyes and inched her right hand up to the next highest knot, and then her left, and then she crunched her legs up until her feet found their next hold. She did this again, picturing herself as a caterpillar, bunching and relaxing, concentrating only on getting to a knot higher than the one Maia had reached. When her hand reached up to grab the next knot and instead she found the bell on the ceiling to ring, signaling that she'd reached the top, she was surprised. She skittered down the rope, flushed and proud, and imagined coming home with that gold certificate. Mama would put it up on the refrigerator.

About fifteen minutes later Maia walked back into the gymnasium, this time accompanied by the school nurse. Ruth heard the nurse say words like *panic attack* and *heights* and *sue,* and Mr. Yorkey agreed to let Maia sit out the rest of the test, and to be his assistant instead. He showed her how to work the stopwatch, and she sat on the start line of the mile run (eight laps around the gym track).

"Seamus, you're up," Mr. Yorkey said. "Ruth, on deck."

Ruth stood awkwardly next to Maia, not sure if she should say something like *I hope you're feeling better now*. But she didn't know how without it coming out sounding like Ruth was lording over her the fact that she had rung the bell and Maia hadn't, and pride was a sin, so instead, she just tugged at the bottom of her shorts and scuffed her sneaker on the squeaky polyurethaned floor. It sounded like a chipmunk.

Maia pushed the button on the stopwatch to get it ready. Ruth put her toe on the red starting line, as close to the inside edge as she

could, without cheating.

"On your mark," Mr. Yorkey called out.

"Hey, Ruth?" Maia said quietly.

"Get set…"

Ruth twisted her neck.

"You're gonna ace this," Maia said, smiling. "Just run like the KKK is chasing you."

"Go!" Mr. Yorkey shouted.

–

Last year Granny's best friend in the world had died of cancer. She and Miz Lonnie had come up north from Mississippi when they were seventeen and had gotten jobs in a factory together and got married a year apart. Miz Lonnie was the sister she'd never had, and at her funeral, Granny wept so hard that she had to be helped out of the church.

She took to her bed, drinking the medicinal whiskey. An hour later Ruth cracked the door open to make sure she was all right, because it was scary to see someone you were used to envisioning as the very definition of solid break into pieces before your eyes. Granny was sitting on the bed, still in her black lace dress, a shoe box in her lap. Spread all around her were photographs so old that they had wavy edges, with handwritten ink on the back that had turned brown with age. "Baby girl, you come sit with me," Granny said, and Ruth crawled onto the mattress and tucked herself tight underneath the old woman's arm.

Ruth pointed to one scalloped photo. "Is that you, Granny?"

The picture was of a woman younger than Mama, even, with hair pulled back into a bun and a crisp white shirt tucked into her skirt. She was pointing at the camera and laughing.

"That's me," Granny said. "And look, in the background here, that's your great-granny." Ruth looked closer and saw a woman with a pinched mouth standing on the porch in the background, her arms crossed. "She was mad because Lonnie and me, we were always foolin' around."

"Where's Miz Lonnie?" Ruth asked.

"On the other side of the camera," Granny explained. "She had just got it that day, and she said I could be her model."

Ruth snuggled closer. Granny smelled of talcum powder and rosewater and Maker's Mark. "What about this one?" she said, holding up a picture of four austere youths-two young men stiffly holding the elbows of Granny and Miz Lonnie, who wore flower corsages that had been bleached white by the exposure process.

"Well, that was a church social. Lonnie, she was wild for that boy, but she wasn't allowed to go on her own, so he brought along a friend

as my date. Go figure, I fell hard for him."

"That's Granddaddy?" Ruth asked.

"No, his name was Jerald. He was the first boy I loved. Granddaddy was the last."

They sat on the bed sifting through the entire shoe box, each photograph a memory. Granny talked about creeks she used to swim in with Miz Lonnie and the coonhound her family had that used to attack porcupines. She pointed to a gold cross Ruth's great-granny wore in one picture, which was the same gold cross Granny had around her neck at that very moment. There was a photo of her and Miz Lonnie in Times Square with old-time cars that Ruth had seen only in movies, and one of Granny pregnant with Mama, holding Miz Lonnie's toddler son, Abraham, like he was a practice run. Then Ruth found a picture that had gotten wedged in the cardboard at the side. This one, though, wasn't from Miz Lonnie's camera. It was a newspaper clipping of a hanged man. "What happened to him?" Ruth asked.

"The KKK happened to him," Granny said. She reached for her bottle of whiskey and took another shot. "White men, with their pointy hoods, burning their crosses." She breathed fire at Ruth, who closed her eyes and held her nose. "They killed him. Lonnie and me, we saw it on the way to school. And I near passed out, but Lonnie, she caught me and she told me we had to get away. We were gonna leave town and go somewhere things like this never happened-"

Just then, Mama came into the bedroom. "What on earth is going on here?" she demanded, as Ruth slipped the newspaper clipping under her leg. Mama sniffed the air and frowned, taking the whiskey bottle and the shot glass off Granny's nightstand. "What kind of example you setting?" she chided, and to Ruth she said, "That's enough. You leave Granny to get some rest." As Ruth curled the newspaper clipping into her hand, Mama pulled back the covers and took off Granny's shoes, helping her get to bed. "Why you telling Ruth about all that?" Mama said. "She's a baby!"

By now Granny was slurring her words. "Them crackas wasn't shit," she muttered. "We left town and didn't look back. We left before Jerald even got buried."

Ruth hid the newspaper clipping underneath her mattress. Sometimes she would take it out and look at it, but the image was grainy and she couldn't connect that poor man with the one in a suit and tie who had stood for a formal photo holding Granny's arm like it was made of fine china. She couldn't imagine the man twisting on that rope picking out carnations and baby's breath for a pretty corsage.

Sometimes at night, Ruth would wonder: If not for the KKK, would Granny have stayed in Mississippi and married Jerald? If not

for the KKK, would Ruth even be here?

–

"Go!" Mr. Yorkey shouted, and Ruth did.

She pivoted on her foot, and instead of running the mile to get a gold certificate of presidential fitness, she threw herself at Maia, yanking at her glossy ponytail, rolling with her on the floor until Ruth had her pinned down, one forearm across Maia's collarbones while the other hand drew back in a fist.

"Go ahead," Maia dared. "Punch me."

Ruth was so surprised, she hesitated.

"Because then you'll just wind up cleaning toilets like your mother."

Ruth could feel her heart beating so hard, it was practically external. She was sweating, her hair coming out of its elastic to curl natural around her face. It was like Cinderella all over again, turning back into her rags with her pumpkin.

She let go of Maia abruptly and walked away from her, her back to the rest of the class, which had gone absolutely silent watching the show.

Mr. Yorkey grasped her arm firmly. "Ruth," he said, "would you like to go sit down and control your emotions?"

She faced the gym teacher. "No," Ruth said honestly, because what she really wanted to do was smack Maia. What she really wanted to do was go back in time ten minutes to the moment before Maia had said anything. Or maybe further-say, two months-before she had ever set foot in this school.

"Go to the program director's office," Mr. Yorkey said tightly. "Now."

–

The director of First Program at Dalton was a very thin woman named Mrs. Grau-Lerner, who smelled of mothballs and peppermint. Ruth, who had never been sent to the principal's office in her life, was shivering.

"Do you know what you did wrong, Ruth?" Mrs. Grau-Lerner asked.

Ruth shook her head. She hadn't hit Maia, although she had wanted to, so why was she being punished?

"Not only were you involved in an altercation…you also were rude to Mr. Yorkey."

Ruth looked up at her. She thought Mr. Yorkey had been asking her a question. She didn't realize it was actually a test.

If Mr. Yorkey had wanted her to sit down and cool off, he should have told her so. Had it been Mama, for example, she would have said, *Do your homework*. No wiggle room there, just a direct order.

Instead, Mr. Yorkey had given Ruth a choice, and now she was being disciplined for taking it.

"Mrs. Grau-Lerner, Maia said-"

The woman held up her hand. "Ruth," she replied, "we don't blame others at Dalton. We take responsibility for our own actions."

Ruth looked into her lap. "Yes, ma'am," she said.

Suddenly there was a knock on the director's office door, and a secretary opened it. "Ms. Brooks is here," she said, and through the slice that was opened Ruth could see Mama still in her uniform, crackling with questions.

"Why don't you wait in Ms. Thomas's room while I speak with your mother?" Mrs. Grau-Lerner said.

Ruth slipped out of the office and past her mama with her eyes cast down. She knew there would be a reckoning in private. She walked to the classroom, which was empty because all the other students in Ms. Thomas's class were still getting tested in the gymnasium. She sat down at her desk, and then stood up and walked toward the front of the classroom.

She picked up the chalk and wrote her name on the board, underneath that night's homework assignment. Then she erased it, so that you couldn't see the letters. Just a ghost that let you know something had been there.

–

Mama was mad, all right, but not at Ruth. "Social difficulties, my foot," she muttered under her breath, as they boarded the bus together. "More like they're the ones who are having trouble adjusting. Can't deal with the *climate,* what does that even mean?"

Ruth was afraid to speak. If she did, then she would have to tell Mama about Maia and what she'd said, and she didn't want to do that. But the bus stopped at the spot where they should have gotten off to go to Ms. Mina's, and they stayed on. It wasn't following the uptown route to Harlem. Ruth had no idea where they were headed.

Maybe Mama was so angry she had forgotten to get off the bus.

"Mama," Ruth asked in a small voice. "Where we going?"

In response, Mama pushed the cord for the next stop and took Ruth's hand. They got off the bus, belched into the frenetic hurry of Forty-second Street. Ruth huddled closer to Mama, avoiding tourists who were pointing at the lighted billboards and the girls in too little clothes and too much makeup who checked their reflections in the windows of fancy restaurants.

"Here we go," Mama announced, walking into a small store that sold gloves and barrettes and scarves and any other accessory you could think of. Maybe Ms. Mina had been sending Mama on an errand when she got diverted to the school. Ruth trailed her fingers along a

display of hanging earrings that were made of feathers and tiny woven dream catchers.

"Ruth," Mama called, and she turned around. "Is this what you were talking about?"

She was pointing to a case of glittering rhinestone headbands, each brighter than the next. On their blue velvet field, they looked like constellations.

Sirius, Ruth thought.

"Pick one," Mama said.

Ruth blinked, shocked. Of all the outcomes she could have imagined, being rewarded for getting sent to the program director's office was not one of them. "Mama," she said, "I don't need it…"

"Oh yes you do," she said. She pointed to one that looked like a string of daisies, made of crystals. "That's pretty."

Ruth nodded.

"You know how I wear a uniform? It's so Ms. Mina and Mr. Sam and everyone else in that building recognizes who I am. This is *your* uniform." Her mama picked up the daisy band and settled it gently on Ruth's head, like she was being crowned. "If this is what it takes to make them see you," she said, "then so be it."

–

Although Ruth knew she wasn't allowed out on the fire escape because Mama thought it was unsafe, she waited until everyone was asleep and then crawled outside. She lay on her back, careful not to get too close to the edge, and stared up at the stars. It was easy to find Sirius, as Ms. Thomas had said. It was by far the brightest, shining even through the smog and the clouds and the ambient light of the city.

Ruth reached up and touched her rhinestone headband. She thought about the bright beam that had left Sirius eight and a half years ago. It was reaching her fire escape and Christina's home and Dalton all at once. No matter where you stood, you'd be underneath the same light.

About the Author

JODI PICOULT is the author of twenty-three novels, including the #1 *New York Times* bestsellers *Leaving Time, The Storyteller, Lone Wolf, Between the Lines, Sing You Home, House Rules, Handle with Care, Change of Heart, Nineteen Minutes,* and *My Sister's Keeper*. She lives with her husband and three children.

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